

Staff Summary

The Early Learning Council (ELC) met from 10:30 am to 3:30 pm on October 19, 2005. The day included presentations and discussion about: 1) changes proposed to WorkFirst and the Working Connections Child Care Program; 2) the Early Learning and Development Benchmarks; 3) preliminary recommendations from the Early Learning Council's Technical Advisory Committee regarding Quality Rating and Tiered Reimbursement; and 4) governance and the organization of early learning.

Meeting Agenda and Goals: Bob Watt and Regina Jones opened the meeting with an overview of the agenda and the reminder that the Council has only one more meeting (November 8th) before its interim recommendations must be submitted to the Governor and the Steering Committee.

Welfare Reform: Regina Jones provided a brief overview of the changes proposed to Work First and Working Connections Child Care. In response to budget problems, the Work First Workgroup is proposing that income eligibility for Working Connections Child Care be reduced from 200% of Federal Poverty to 175%, full-family sanctions be instituted for families on cash assistance where the parent(s) are out of compliance with work requirements, and that a five year limit on benefits be enforced.

Concern was expressed by several speakers about cuts to child care and the need for child care subsidies to be moved out of the TANF box and into quality early learning.

EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT BENCHMARKS

Background and Context: Rachael Langen, DSHS Division of Child Care and Early Learning (DCCEL) opened the discussion by explaining that the benchmarks were intended to describe the key things children should know and be able to do when they enter kindergarten. They were developed as a joint venture between the Governor's office and the Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction (OSPI). An agency core team and a 30-member advisory committee provided guidance to the development of the benchmarks.

The benchmarks address all domains of development and are voluntary for parents and other caregivers. They are intended to create alignment among early learning programs. The following principles guided their development: parents are their children's first teachers; the focus should be on all children, not just low income; they should be research-based; recognizing that young children are active learners, they should incorporate multiple approaches; content should be age appropriate; and cultural and linguistic differences should be respected.

Marcia Riggers (OSPI) indicated that the development process was intentional and intended to be inclusive. The group listened to thousands of voices but failed to truly hear and acknowledge the depth of concern being expressed by some communities. Therefore, additional conversation is needed to identify where and how the

benchmarks should be revised to recognize and support the diversity of the state's children.

Gloria Trinidad, ELC member, discussed the concerns of the Bias and Fairness Subgroup of the Benchmark Advisory Committee. These included concerns about how the benchmarks will be used including who will be using them, are these people culturally competent, and will the benchmarks be used appropriately with children of color? Gloria asked what is the commitment to revise the benchmarks? How will guidance and training be provided about their use? How will research about under-represented populations be used to guide revisions? How will input about the benchmarks be collected for use in making revisions?

Discussion and Strategies: Regina Jones indicated that the governor is committed to getting this right and highlighted page 13 of the publication, *The Role of State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems in Promoting Cultural Competence and Effective Cross-Cultural Communication*, by Harvinder Sareen, et.al. This page demonstrates differences, based on cultural beliefs and practices, in developmental milestones. These differences need to be addressed and requires that we have a conversation about institutional racism. Regina suggested that ELC members (and perhaps members of the broader Washington Learns) participate in the *Undoing Institutional Racism Seminar*. Further, there are models from other states (including Hawaii and Minnesota) that can help us with this discussion.

Regina asked Council members their ideas about strategies and approaches that can guide us in moving forward. Among the strategies suggested were: meetings between parents and teachers; the development of a supplement to be used with diverse communities; engaging state and national experts to help us develop strategies for using the benchmarks in a culturally appropriate manner; increasing our awareness of bias and ensuring that this awareness guides everything the Council does; making sure that teachers in kindergarten through third grade are culturally responsive and know the special issues some parents face; creating linkages with higher education to ensure that teachers are prepared to work with the diverse families and children in our state; and building in accountability—to be sure we're really doing what we think we're doing. One member reminded the group that the benchmarks have been distributed statewide and are in use.

Bob Watt suggested that we find out how much it would cost to issue a new benchmarks document—and that we determine where the dollars would come from. This suggestion was endorsed by other Council members -- as a positive step toward understanding and incorporating the concerns of diverse communities. Council members also acknowledged the need to encourage representative students to enter the teaching profession and for us all to increase our knowledge of other cultures and languages.

Audience Members Raised the Following Issues: the need for provider training so that providers can better respond to the needs of the children they serve; the reality that the benchmarks are already in use; need to make sure Tribes are at the table and that an inclusive education system is developed; one audience member argued that the benchmark process should be started over; and another the importance of addressing the needs of children with special needs (where are they in the pipeline discussion?).

The ELC agreed to take responsibility for acting on the concerns raised and ruled out an addendum dealing with culturally-responsive implementation. It will develop an estimate of the cost of doing a new version of the benchmarks and develop a plan for ensuring that the benchmarks are responsive to the needs of diverse communities.

Quality Rating and Tiered Reimbursement: Graciela Valencia, John Bancroft and Nancy Gerber presented the preliminary recommendations of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). Graciela, TAC co-chair, provided an overview of the TAC process that included building on the work done in Spokane and King County and involving a total of five meetings between September 8th and October 17th. In addition, members participated in subcommittees that worked on specific categories and have been doing outreach to groups around the state.

The Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a system that provides clear steps, supports and incentives for early learning and school-age providers to increase the quality of services they provide. The program ratings provide parents and communities with information about the type and quality of early learning and school age programs that are available in their community. The ultimate intent is to improve developmental outcomes for children.

Overview of Proposed QRIS Design: John Bancroft summarized the proposed design including that the system: 1) would use a combination of requirements (building blocks) and points that allow multiple pathways for demonstrating higher quality; 2) have five levels with Level 1 being the first step (compliance with licensing standards) and Level 5 the highest (accreditation or equivalent); and 3) would recognize the differences among settings.

Administrative Issues, Outreach and Tiered Reimbursement: Nancy Gerber talked about the need for provider supports including help in developing quality improvement plans and access to mentors, scholarships and other resources. Outreach needs to begin immediately to provide targeted messages to families, businesses, communities, and providers. Monetary incentives are necessary to encourage providers to participate and offset costs associated with providing higher quality care. Incentives need to build on higher base subsidy rates and include bonuses for providers not participating in the subsidy program and tiered reimbursement (enhanced rates) for high quality programs serving children whose care is subsidized through DSHS.

Council (and Audience) Comments: The design needs to make clear that: 1) compliance with licensing standards includes basic child safety; 2) interaction, communication and support to parents is emphasized; and 3) issues related to cultural competence and services to children with special needs are included throughout. The importance of increasing basic reimbursement rates was echoed by a number of the Council and audience participants. Question was raised about whether the intent of the legislation was to make QRIS participation voluntary for providers serving state subsidized children. Another Council member suggested that we begin referring to “scholarships for early learning services” instead of care being subsidized. One audience participant asked that “tribal certification” be included on par with licensing standards.

Bob Watt asked that the TAC final recommendations be provided to the Early Learning Council in advance of the Council's November 8th meeting.

GOVERNANCE AND THE ORGANIZATION OF EARLY LEARNING

Bob Watt initiated the discussion about creating an improved infrastructure for early learning in Washington State that would include a public-private partnership with a public outreach or campaign component. While many details need to be resolved, there was significant agreement about recommending the following:

Creation of the Campaign for Early Learning to include:

- A **public-private partnership** that focuses on quality and includes a public outreach component;
- Support to collaboration and public-private partnerships within **local communities**;
- A separate **cabinet-level department** of early learning;
- An ongoing **statewide coordination body** similar to the Early Learning Council.

A primary focus of the Campaign will be to support all families in providing high quality early learning opportunities for their young children—whether care is provided by a parent at home; by family, friends and neighbor caregivers; or in a licensed child care home or center.

The new department would include the following programs (with associated funding streams and other resources): **child care subsidies** (Working Connections, Seasonal, and Teen Parent Child Care); **child care licensing**; **resource and referral services**; **STARS** (provider training system); **other child care quality activities**, e.g. scholarship funds and specialized training; the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP); and the **Head Start State Collaboration Office**. It would also include **school-age care services** including care that is supported through Working Connections Child Care as well as the licensure of school-age care programs.

The following services were mentioned during the September 28th ELC meeting for possible inclusion in the new department. The Council agrees that further discussion is needed to determine if inclusion of these programs is consistent with the mission and purpose of the new agency. Other options include possible phased transition of some programs and coordination between the new agency and programs that are not included as part of the new department.

- **Child care assistance for children served through CPS/CWS**
- **Family support services** (for instance, those facilitated through the Washington Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect including family resource programs)
- **Health Services** (such as First Steps, a program that helps low-income pregnant women access health and social services, and Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, a toll-free telephone line for consumer information, referral for maternity care, and other maternal and child health concerns)
- **Child care health consultants** (training and technical assistance to child care providers through local health departments)
- **Infant and Toddler Early Intervention Services (IDEA Part C)** (provide appropriate services to all eligible children birth to three who have developmental delays or disabilities and their families)
- **Early Childhood Special Education (IDEA Part B)** (ensure access to free, appropriate public education in least restrictive environments for young children who meet state special education eligibility criteria)
- **The Child and Adult Care Food Program** (federal funds to reimburse non-profit and some for-profit providers, including Head Start and ECEAP, for the cost of meals, snacks and nutrition education)
- **Even Start/Family Literacy** (improve early learning outcomes for low-income children whose parents are illiterate or non-English speaking through adult education, parenting, and early childhood education)
- **Early Reading First (Title I, improve language, literacy skills and academic achievement in young children)**

Public Comments: Bob Watt asked for comments from the public in attendance. Comments included: the need for more discussion (and input from the experts) about programs that might be included in a unified department of early learning; and support for the honest, open dialogue about racism that accompanied the benchmark discussion.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:30 pm.